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AUTHOR Luft, Pamela
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of electronic dialogue journals in a college course designed to teach 14 students a student-centered, whole-language reading methodology for use with children with hearing impairments. Students used electronic mail to discuss issues with the course instructor at the same time they were writing interactive journals with students who were deaf or hard-of-hearing. The journals were used to respond to the children's entries, model correct language that was used incorrectly by the children, generate responses that continued the same theme or topic, and ask enough questions to stimulate a response. Using a simultaneous electronic journal to communicate with their instructor was found to be a convenient and comfortable format for most of the student teachers and provided them with an opportunity to ask questions about the course, their practicum, specific interaction strategies with the children with hearing impairments, and planning their own future as teachers. Ten of the 14 pre-service education students became more comfortable in using an electronic dialog format, which was judged as a successful exposure to a whole-language, student-centered teaching experience. (CR)

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Using Electronic Dialogue Journals to Model Whole Language Procedures

by

Pamela Luft
Kent State University
405 White Hall
Kent, OH 44242-0001
Tel.: 330-672-2294 (V)
Tel.: 330-672-2396 (T)
FAX: 330-672-2512

E-mail: pluft@emerald.educ.kent.edu

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Students at Kent State University are fortunate to be exposed to current reading research through faculty at College of Education's Reading Center which also edits The Reading Journal. Students in the course, "Teaching Reading to the Hearing Impaired," learn to adapt holistic reading methodology for use with Deaf and hard-of-hearing children. Most of the 14 students in this course during Spring 1996 reported that they had been taught reading using a strict basal and phonics-based methodology. In several cases it had been a very punitive and unhappy training. I felt it was important for these students to experience the empowerment and shift in balance of power when using a student-centered approach. This would allow them to better evaluate their impact on future classrooms in making methodology decisions. The course was designed to promote discussion and interaction using a whole-language and student-centered philosophy. In addition, assignments were open to negotiation with the result that several were significantly modified and the final exam was given as a take-home.

One of the course requirements was an electronic dialogue journal with the instructor. Students would have the experience of journaling with the instructor as a means of learning appropriate responses for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students with whom they were journaling, and also as a means to more fully allow them to experience empowerment and a conversation in which they were responded to as an equal. Thus, they were both "living" a student-centered interaction and being provided with response models that would

support this approach with their own students. Both experiences in journaling were concurrent so that their learnings could be directly applied to their own students. A pre/posttest survey was conducted to solicit their reaction to this journaling experience and the electronic format. Their journal responses also were analyzed for growth and change.

Students had received prior training in using e-mail and all had e-mail accounts. The instructor provided students with articles about using dialogue journals with Deaf and hard-of-hearing students (Gambrell, 1985; Staton, Peyton, & Gutstein, 1985). These provided the rationale for this approach as well as examples of responses and strategies for teachers to use in generating their responses. These strategies included (a) responding to the content of the student entry, (b) modeling correct language that was used incorrectly by students, (c) generating responses that continued the same theme or topic as the student (not changing topic and "taking control" away from the student), and (d) asking enough questions to stimulate a response but not overwhelming the student or "taking control" of the conversation.

Students were given the same instructions they were to use with their own students in the practicum settings: (a) that no one else would see the journals (except for instructional purposes) unless prior permission was granted, and (b) that students were free to write about any topic they wished. Students were assigned to initiate the dialogue as a means of establishing their role as communication equals from the beginning.

Several requirements were made of the students: they were required to make at least 10 journal entries, one for each week of the ten weeks during which the dialogue was scheduled, at least three sentences for each entry. This was to ensure a regular conversation that was able to develop over time, based on advice from another instructor who had one student make eight entries during Finals Week without waiting for any instructor response between. The faculty member felt that neither a relationship nor a true conversation were allowed to develop (Tiene & Luft, 1996). All correspondence for this electronic journal was saved in mail files established for each student. Hard copies of all journal entries were made for analysis purposes.

Students were free to discuss issues related to their journaling experience with their students in either the class meetings or in the electronic journal with the instructor. Most students chose to use the class meetings although nearly all made at least one comment about their practicum journals during the electronic journal experience. Issues raised in class included sensitive issues such as how to appropriately respond to entries made about the death of a pet or in another case, of a parent, responding to questions that were "too personal," to strategy issues of how to encourage responses from students who had little, if any, written language or those who appeared to persevere on a single topic for several weeks. Instructions were given to respect the students' responses and attempts to communicate at all times; a picture, a single topic, or a sensitive topic were all important communicative efforts by the students. Both students

with questions about responding to death issues also addressed them in their electronic journal with the instructor. Each asked for specific advice in making their response. Both students felt satisfied with the ensuing reaction of their students.

An examination of the electronic journal interactions showed that the number of student contacts ranged between 9 and 18 for the 14, with a mean of 12. The survey instrument consisted of 18 questions and provided a quantitative analysis of the students' experience. Three of the 18 questions showed significant pre/posttest differences. These indicated that the electronic journal experience with the instructor:

- (a) did not suffer from the lack of spontaneity associated with face-to-face communication,
- (b) provided a preferable format because students could articulate their thoughts carefully, and
- (c) was preferable to a hard-copy written dialogue journal experience.

Items that were not significantly different also had important implications showing that:

- (a) the electronic journal assignment did not significantly alter students' usage of e-mail,
- (b) the e-mail format was easy to use,
- (c) students did not prefer face-to-face opportunities to dialogue, and
- (d) the experience made them neither more nor less inclined to express themselves about controversial subjects.

Qualitative results included student comments to three of the 18 questions as well as an analysis of individual student entries. Positive student comments from the posttest included the following:

Time to think about questions/comments. Convenient. Easier to complete task. Easier than finding time for an appointment. Get to know teacher. I liked to write when I wanted. Easier. Quicker. The technology is extremely important! I am always on e-mail and checking it. It is quicker to write on my own time than writing in class against a time constraint.

Negative comments from students included these:

Inconvenient. Could not talk face to face. Not convenient. I like face to face interaction. Like to talk. Slow. Account overload. I would suggest for future use that all people should print a copy of their journal entries. I'm not hip on computer work. I like letters.

The negative comments about preferring face-to-face interactions were not statistically significant because they represented the views of only one of the students. The qualitative analyses of the individual entries showed that 10 of the 14 students indicated formation of a relationship with the instructor. This occurred by changes over the span of conversations indicating (a) a sharing of more personal reflections and thoughts, and (b) asking for personal and/or specific advice. Ten students also used the electronic journal to make specific comments about how the journal was progressing with their students. All students commented about their practicum experience and asked questions about class assignments.

In summary, the electronic journal appeared to be a more convenient and comfortable format for most of the students in the course. It provided them with an opportunity to ask questions about the course, their practicum, specific interaction strategies with students, and about planning their own future. Ten of the 14 students became more comfortable in sharing and asking personal

information and questions, suggesting the formation of a relationship. Their willingness to both share and ask suggests their sense of empowerment and of trust, and a successful exposure to a “whole-language” and student-centered experience.

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